

**A Position Paper on the Theological Issues of *Hyper-Grace*  
Teaching**

**By**

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## Introduction

The issue of *hyper-grace* is rather difficult to assign an originator due to the fact that a number of supposed supporters differ in points of interpretation. The fact that it is growing in influence can be demonstrated by the recent Christian film, "The Shack," which has been criticized for its *hyper-grace* universalism.<sup>1</sup> Yet the typical definition of "hyper-grace" seems to be that anything 'added to' salvation other than grace is to be rejected. The position is stated in the following way: "God does not leave you wondering whether you are saved or not. He tells you outright that you are His and that nothing can ever separate you from the love of Christ. Not even sin because His blood is greater than your sin! Knowing that all your sins are forgiven is crucial for your health, peace of mind, wholeness and wellness."<sup>2</sup>

Unless this explanation is considered through the comprehensive biblical perspective of the doctrine of grace, it could lead to misunderstandings that could affect the biblical and theological foundation of the individual believer. Some essential questions need to be raised in order to reveal any hidden theological difficulties.

## Challenges to the *Hyper-Grace* Teaching

Basically, the discussion that involves the *hyper-grace* teaching centers on questions about our faith, conduct and final destination.

1. One issue is the absoluteness of the belief, i.e. grace is all-encompassing and cannot be rescinded from whom it was given. In other words, sin is powerless against God's grace. Therefore, this raises questions like, "Does the Old and New Testament scripture support this depiction of the dichotomy of sin and grace?" or "Are there instances where God has changed his mind about giving grace?"
2. The above problematic aspect leads us to another set of questions that affect our Christian conduct: "Are good works "necessary" in order to retain salvation status? If a person has no "good works", is this "necessary" evidence that the person is not "saved"? Are there instances where God has "overlooked" the absence of "good works" and has guaranteed the salvation of an individual?"
3. Finally, these implications of the hyper-grace issue appeal for a response concerning the biblical doctrine of Hell. Is Hell a temporary "holding" place for sinners ultimately destined for Heaven or it is for the purpose of "purgation" and not a permanent place of judgment?

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, please, refer to: <http://bereanresearch.org/the-shack-to-be-the-next-blasphemous-blockbuster-film/>, accessed on 10 April 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Prince, *Destined to Reign: The secret to effortless success, wholeness and victorious living* (Singapore: Joseph Prince Resources, 2007), 95.

## **The Essence of God's Grace Mediated to Us through Jesus Christ**

The Greek word χάρις (commonly translated "grace") is used 155 times in the NT. It can have many nuances and is translated in a number of ways. For instance, the English Standard Version translates the χάρις as "favor" (Lk. 1:3), "benefit" (Lk 6:32), "credit" (Lk 6:34), "thank" (Lk. 17:9). The great majority of times the ESV translates χάρις as "grace". Although grace is associated with forgiveness, it should not be translated as "mercy". In almost all of the usages of χάρις in the NT, the underlying meaning is "favor" - particularly God's empowering favor. This grace is associated with and mediated through Jesus Christ. Below are the main categories of this divine grace:

**1. God's grace or favor is that which brings salvation, including forgiveness, justification and holiness.** *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17). For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people. (Titus 2:11)*

This salvation involves the forgiveness of our sins. *In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace. (Eph. 1:7)* Believers are counted as righteous, or justified, because of this grace. *So that being justified by his grace. (Titus 3:7)*

In addition to the forgiveness of sins, grace brings about the spiritual regeneration of sinners. *Even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved. (Eph. 2:5, 6)*

This grace or favor, which operates in the salvation and holiness of believers, was given to them before the ages began. *Who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began. (2 Tim. 1:9)*

This grace is necessary and operative in the belief or faith of all believers. *When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed. (Acts 18:27b)*

**2. Grace is that which empowers believers for New Testament ministry.**

*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. (1 Cor. 15:10)*

*And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. (2 Cor. 9:8)*

*Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. (Eph. 3:7)*

This grace for ministry is not only for the apostles and pastors, but also for every member of the Body of Christ. *But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.* (Eph. 4:7)

**3. The grace or favor of God, though free, is conditionally experienced. People may grow in it, be given more of it, or misuse it.**

*But he gives more grace. Therefore, it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."* (James 4:6)

*But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.* (2 Pet. 3:18)  
*For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.* (Jude 4)

It is this last aspect of grace (of the three mentioned above) that the *hyper-grace* teaching seems to misunderstand. Particularly, the failure to see that grace can be perverted into sensuality. Only a grateful continuing in humility and faith enables the believer to grow in God's favor that brings all of the blessings of God, including justification, holiness and perfection.

### **Problematic Aspects of the *Hyper-Grace* Issue**

What are the conclusions from the *hyper-grace* teaching that are not in line with the above biblical 'grace' assertions?

1. No restrictions. In essence, the issue and reason for this doctrine seems to stem from not only a desire to answer today's believers in questions about salvation but primarily as a reaction to the "restrictions" as interpreted from Calvinism's "limited atonement" that restricts "grace" only to the "elect" (thereby subverting Christ's atonement for all and thus grace for all) as well as Arminianism's position of placing conditions for salvation, i.e. a subjective control of obedience or non-obedience to the law, thereby leaving believers "unsure" of their salvation and thus limiting their numbers.
2. Sanctification is unnecessary. An underlying corollary to "salvation by grace for past, present and future sins" is that "calls" to "holiness" are thought as unnecessary and irrelevant because they imply legalism and "grace-hatred". Teaching like progressive sanctification is called "spiritually murderous lie" because it implies, "saved by grace but perfected by human effort" and the result is a church that is "judgmental, angry, hopeless, helpless, dependent, fearful, uninspired, ineffective, and perpetually spiritually immature."<sup>3</sup> This subject remains part of the ongoing debate even between the *hyper-grace* teachers and the following statement summarizes the position of many of them: "Sanctification is God's work, not yours. Just as His gift of salvation is something to work out in your life, so is His sanctification. You already

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<sup>3</sup> Clark Whitten, *Pure Grace: The Life Changing Power of Uncontaminated Grace*, (Destiny Image Publishers, 2012), 28.

have it, so enjoy it!"<sup>4</sup> However, this aspect of the hyper-grace doctrine is ameliorated by Joseph Prince in discussion with Michael Brown: "If you hear of any 'grace' teaching that tells you it is all right to sin, to live without any regard for the Lord, and that there are no consequences to sin, my advice to you is to flee from that teaching. You have just been exposed to counterfeit grace. Genuine grace teaches that believers in Christ are called to live holy, blameless, and above reproach. It teaches that sin always produces destructive consequences and that it is only through the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ that one can be set free from the dominion of sin."<sup>5</sup> In the same article, Brown reasserts the difference between him and Prince, however, as, "Our principle area of disagreement remains his teaching that the moment we are saved, our future sins are already pronounced forgiven (in contrast with the idea that our future sins are paid for but sin is not pronounced forgiven until it is committed and brought to the Lord."<sup>6</sup>

3. Unqualified assurance of salvation. An anti-conviction preaching of *hyper-grace* is based on a misunderstanding of (1) the Spirit's convicting work, (2) the need for a Christian's 'walk' in the fear of the Lord, and also includes (3) a subjective refusal to apply Jesus' pre-cross teachings, e.g. Matt 6:15, "if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions". Ultimately, the *hyper-grace* doctrine depends on the unqualified assurance of salvation, i.e. (much in line with deterministic Calvinism) in arguing that a truly "elect" person, in line with their understanding of "grace", cannot lose salvation. Scriptural warnings such as Colossians 1:21-23, 2 Peter 1:10-11, etc. are ignored.<sup>7</sup>

## **The Problem of *Hyper-Grace* through the Theologies Found in the Letters of Hebrews and 1 John: Biblical Case Study**

By form, both letters have in common that they are not letters in the first instance. They lack the general and widespread standardized structure of letters from that time. Hebrews is an early sermon and 1 John an apologetical comment on the Gospel of John. By contents, both letters are polemical in that they warn believers not to backslide from the faith. They provide useful thought to the debate of *hyper-grace* since they do not so much warn from exterior attacks on our faith, but from an internal erosion of fundamental truth.

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<sup>4</sup> Michael L. Brown, "Dr. Paul Ellis Underscores the Errors of Hyper-Grace," January 28, 2015,

<https://askdrbrown.org/library/dr-paul-ellis-underscores-errors-hyper-grace>

<sup>5</sup> Michael Brown, "Hyper-Grace: Setting the Record Straight With Pastor Joseph Prince," January 30, 2017,

<http://www.christianpost.com/news/hyper-grace-setting-the-record-straight-with-pastor-joseph-prince-173553/#HfHqsJPcQG2K4xWh.99>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Michael L. Brown, "Dr. Paul Ellis Underscores the Errors of Hyper-Grace."

### **1a. The Situation of the Hebrew Christians**

The recipients were ethnic Jews, formerly steeped in Old Testament *kultus* practices, who had found Jesus as their Messiah. They will have been saved from governmental repression as long as Christianity was seen as a sect within Judaism, but this changed. The heat of persecution was on when they received this address; they were *tempted*, (2:18; 4:15); they had been publicly denounced, dispossessed of their property and some members of the church were still imprisoned (10:32-34). One way to escape this persecution was to return to "Judaism only" and deny Christ, since the Jewish religion was granted legal status by Rome, contrary to Christianity. Against this notion, the author shows how Christ is superior to the old institutions of the Law, how Jesus himself suffered from his enemies and that therefore faithfulness is required of these believers, too (3:6).

### **1b. The Danger of Backsliding Is a Reality**

While the situation described above could lead to an official renunciation of the Christian faith, the author in fact pictures a different kind of backsliding. In 2:1 it talks about *drifting away*,<sup>8</sup> from *what we have heard*, with which are certainly meant the *elementary teachings about the Christ* (6:1f). This drifting away is the gradual, noiseless and non-dramatic act through which a ship is let loose from its moorings and veers toward peril. Consequences are dire. The Hebrews had experienced a *great salvation*, but if it is *neglected*, they will receive a *just penalty* (2:2-3). In the context of our problem it will be worth mentioning, that not only currents (13:9) can bring a ship onto a fatal course, also *waves and every wind of doctrine* will do their part to destroy the faith (Eph. 4:22). Jesus died for the sake of others' salvation (2:9); and his subsequent priestly ministry is also vicarious (9:24). Yet those who *shrink back* are contrasted to those who keep on having faith and their souls will be preserved (10:39). The petitions in chapter 3 are urgent. The recipients are addressed as *holy brethren* (3:1); but among them can be people with *an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God* (3:12). The scene in chapter 3 is set to compare those prone to backslide with the wilderness generation of Israel. The preacher of Hebrews quotes sections from Ps. 95:7-11 to this end. "The psalm traces the way that God's disposition toward the wilderness generation moved from contempt (Heb. 3:10a) and complaint (Heb. 3:10b) to wrath (3:11a) and the oath that they would never enter his rest (3:11b...)." <sup>9</sup>

### **1c. Grace Is Never a Quiet Conscience in Hebrews**

The noun χάρις is mentioned 6 times in Hebrews. Hardly in this letter does the term have the Pauline connotation of 'grace over works'; closest to it comes 2:9, where it speaks of the grace that God gave through Jesus who took the believer's place when he tasted death. Heb. 4:16 encourages the church to draw near to the throne of grace to receive grace. In this context, grace is something to be actively pursued. Heb. 10:29 talks about the *spirit of grace*, who can be insulted and 12:15 states the possibility that people can come short of the grace of God,

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<sup>8</sup> Gr. παραπνομιην, which is a danger to ships that are not on course.

<sup>9</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews*, (New Haven: Yale, 2010), 256.

especially through strive in the church. The heart should be *strengthened by grace*, which is an antidote against strange teachings and an overemphasis on dietary laws (13:9). The last occurrence is found in the benediction in 13:25.

## **2a. The Background of 1 John**

In 1 John the church(es) had received this letter after going through a recent split (2:19). The adversaries were probably still around, and their influence is fought against in this letter.<sup>10</sup> The backsliders, like the believers who stayed in the churches, were Johannite Christians with their distinct higher Christology. According to John's gospel, Jesus is God (1:1 and 20:28). What the adversaries denied is that Jesus Christ of Nazareth was a human being, too (1 John 2:22f; 4:2). Subsequently, the author emphasizes the bodily aspect of our Lord's being (1 John 1:1; 5:6-8).

## **2b. The Errors of the Adversaries**

This early form of Docetism had grave consequences. It shows a fellowship where "everything is grace." Since Jesus, so the adversaries believed, did not have a real body and what Christ did in his earthly life did not really matter, so they would not need to pay much attention to their conduct. The result is antinomianism, the belief that Christians are free from any law and can behave, as they deem right. This went so far that the adversaries believed themselves to be free from sin (1 John 1:8). Contrary to this heresy, John states that Christians are not freed from the commandments but have been freed to keep them (1 John 5:3)!

The noun 'grace' does not appear in 1 John. There is a reason for this, though. A careful hermeneutical reconstruction shows what the author was up against, and which kind of heresies the adversaries were spreading in the Johannine churches. First, their conviction to be without sin provided a free pass for a licentious living. They loved *the world and its desires* (2:15-17). The reason behind this error was a "once-for-all perfectionism."<sup>11</sup> Second, since the first coming of Jesus (in the flesh) wasn't important to the adversaries, they also neglected the hope of His second coming. John, however, is vigorously stressing the second coming of Jesus: in his gospel, he talks about the last day (12:48), but in the letter, he writes about the last hour (2:18). Spiritually healthy in this respect is also his mentioning of the judgment day (4:17). Third, this heresy led to an attitude of aloofness, which destroyed the fellowship in the church. Hate had been sown (3:14f). John does not use the word *koinonia* in his gospel, but in 1 John 1:6 he needs to say it out loud: a spirituality detached from the church is a lie. Fellowship is created through the bond of being God's children and striving together for purification (1:7). An extreme measure is John's example of Cain (3:12), showing the total devastation of fellowship. The social consequences of dissent can be seen among the Hebrews, too (Heb. 10:25). All this fallacy seems to have been promoted with eloquence. The opponents were teaching (2:27) and even employed prophecy (4:1f). Yet the author dismantles their verbosity, *let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth* (3:18).

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<sup>10</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, (New Haven: Yale, 1982), 47ff.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 638.



1 John shows clearly that the commandments have not become outdated or superfluous. A genuine experience with the grace of Jesus Christ leads to keeping the commandments, which is a moral and ethical life-style and in fellowship with other believers.

## Conclusion

The theology of Hebrews shows that backsliding is a real possibility for Christians. The Hebrews Christians were in danger to lose their salvation. Therefore, they are encouraged and admonished to hold on to their faith. Grace helps them to do so, but it does not negate the fact that the believers should make every effort to persevere.

John's first letter is in many ways an even more compelling warning as the split-away group lived in "too much grace" and thus had discarded vital elements of faith and ethics. No mentioning of a future judgment, no sin to deal with but only to "enjoy" – the adversaries had created an "effortless" faith.

It has been pointed out that Joseph Prince has a faulty knowledge of the Old Testament.<sup>12</sup> Yet grace has to be understood in view of the law. Or similar, as is sometimes preached, we don't understand the Good News if we haven't heard the bad news yet. One tenet of the *hyper-grace* teaching says the Ten Commandments are outdated and one should not any longer preach them.<sup>13</sup> Prince is right in that the law does not produce holiness, but that does not mean that it is without function. The law helps people to see their sin, which in turn casts them on grace (Rom.7:7). The law thus remains a much-needed antagonist to grace. Grace does not negate the commandments, but the love of God helps us to keep them (1 John 5:3).

The Hebrew Christians were caught between their future hope and present calamities (2:5; 6:5). The author is trying to bridge that gap Christologically. The *hyper-grace* teaching neglects a fundamental element of the New Testament "already now – not yet" teaching regarding sanctification. In Christ, we *are already* sanctified (1 Cor 1:2) and by the power of the Holy Spirit we *are being* sanctified (1 Pet 1:2). Being a child of God is, therefore, not only static, but also a dynamic relationship. "To the extent that the Christian remains in Christ, to that extent he does not sin."<sup>14</sup> Grace is never a "come as you are" welcome (see Ex.3:5).

Karl Barth has sometimes been suspected of universalism. Yet he fully supported Bonhoeffer's stand against a 'cheap grace.' According to Barth, and he might have written this prophetically in 1967, Jesus Christ would not be the true son of the true God, if we could possess Him like

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<sup>12</sup> <https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-hypergrace-of-joseph-prince-a-review-of-destined-to-reign/>, accessed on 12 April 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Prince, *Destined to Reign*, (Tulsa: Harrison House, 2017), 121.

<sup>14</sup> Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 430.

someone is in charge over a bank account. Cheap grace is easily available and at the complete disposal of man.<sup>15</sup> Cheap grace is grace that has become a product.

In a general vein, it must be said that an emphasis on grace is needed for every Christian personally and that the message of the New Testament stresses grace over and against the law. An unconditional grace, however, sanctions an unconditional life-style, which in turn goes against the grain of biblical ethics. It has to be borne in mind that an eternal separateness from God is factual according to the Scriptures. Jesus was, by definition of his personality, not a fire and brimstone preacher, yet he spoke about hell at least 24 times in the gospels. Based on the discussed scriptural and theological considerations, we conclude, therefore, that any deviation from the comprehensive biblical perspective on the doctrine of grace and one-sidedness would lead to some level of disregard for the sound and balanced principles of saving faith and godly behavior.

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<sup>15</sup> Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, IV, 4, (Zürich: EVZ, 1967), 230.